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Christianisation and Late Antique Patronage – Conflicts and Everyday Nuisances

Maijastina Kahlos

Introduction

The history of Late Antiquity is packed with accounts of religious struggles, temple destructions, urban disturbances, resistance and violence between religious groups. The written sources are inclined to emphasise the dramatic and drastic instead of the regular and peaceful. The sources do not need to report repeated activities and uninterrupted life. It is this tendency that has influenced the scholarly propensity to see the religious changes (that is, the so-called Christianisation) of the Mediterranean area in conflictual terms. Christian literary sources tend to highlight the dichotomies and clashes in their triumphalist accounts of the Christian expansion. However, the day-to-day social life filled with negotiations and compromises obviously was more complex than the ecclesiastical writers tend to tell us. As Roger Bagnall appositely remarks, ‘as so often, documentation follows trouble’.¹ Documentation does not usually follow peaceful life.

My article is an attempt to break out the conflictual narrative and to balance between the late antique melodramas and the not-so-exciting everyday nuisances with economic and social issues. This is not to minimise the occurrences of violent conflicts in Late Antiquity or to claim for only easy-going coexistence between different religious groups. Instead, I will focus on the *conflict of interests* in the regular routines of everyday life.

I will discuss the patronage relationships in Italy and North Africa in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. I am inclined to argue that a powerful landlord could influence his clients to embrace Christianity or retain old practices. The same applies to the rivalry between ‘Donatists’ and ‘Catholics’ in North Africa where local landowners were supposed to exert pressure on their tenants. I do not aim to present an exhaustive social historical survey on local landowners and patronage relationships in the process of Christianisation. The purpose of this article is rather draw attention to how conflicts of interests, economic ties of dependence and rivalry in authority in local communities. This is often neglected in the discussions of Christianisation which tend to highlight conflicts between religious groups.

My discussion focuses on the rural patronage of landowners who were expected to control their

¹ Bagnall 1993, 174.

tenants' religious actions and beliefs. This idea of the landlord's power and duty on his dependents had a long history in Roman society in which the *pater familias*, the head of the household, was held as responsible for the religious sphere in the *familia*. Much of the religious change in Late Antiquity, the process that is conventionally called the Christianisation of the Mediterranean world, was conducted in the lines of the Roman social system with its hierarchy, patronage and ties of dependence. We have cases with conflicts of interest, not only between pagan landowners and bishops in the regular routines of everyday life, but also between Christian landlords and local bishops who compete for authority in doctrinal disputes and private religiosity. Late antique bishops' complaints tell us about the continuing 'paganism' in the countryside, at least in the form that these bishops imagined and understood.²

I will start by discussing the two trends in the research of Late Antiquity, on the one hand, the continuing emphasis on violent conflicts in historical research, and on the other hand, the prominence given to everyday life peaceful coexistence and negotiations. After these considerations, I will bring late antique patronage and other economic ties of dependence to the scene. We will look at local landowners and their peasants in the sermons and letters of fourth- to sixth-century bishops in Italy and North Africa. My discussion is by no means indicated to be exhaustive. One notion that comes forth in the late antique bishops' writings is the negligence of landowners. Furthermore, the conversions of the rural population were not taken as a self-evident fait accompli but bishops also problematised the sincerity and depth of the more or less coerced conversions of tenants. I will end with a brief discussion on the 'soft power' of the sixth-century bishop, Gregory of Rome. As Gregory's letters indicate, the religiosity of tenants and the laxity of landowners still vexed the bishops.

From melodramas to everyday nuisances

Violent conflicts were a significant part of late antique life, at least on the level of imagery.³ How considerable a role that violent conflicts played in Late Antiquity has been an ongoing debate in recent

² 'Paganism' here refers to the concept developed and used by ancient Christian writers to refer to their religious others. In addition to pagan beliefs and practices with reference to social reality, paganism functioned as polemical tools in Christian literature, often in the context of intra-religious disputes. Paganism was a theological phantom that functioned as a mirror in which one's theological views and moral conduct were reflected. For further discussion, see Kahlos 2007, 18-26.

³ For the discourse on violence, see Gaddis 2005, 13-14 and Sizgorich 2009, 4.

scholarship.⁴ Another question is whether there was an increase in violence in late Roman society in comparison to the early imperial period. This leads us to the problem of the number, nature and representativeness of our sources, again as compared to the early Empire. We have far more reports about crises than normal patterns of life. This includes the eternal problem of historical sources that tend to mention and highlight the dramatic, violent, spectacular and extraordinary at the expense of repeated routines and undisturbed everyday life. Historical sources tend to focus on specific incidents and unexceptional, they do not make comments peaceful conditions when everything goes as is expected, they usually make comments when there are problems.

Moreover, the question of whether there was increased participation of people in violent conflicts, especially in religiously motivated violence, is a topic that remains to be debated.⁵ The question draws us to a bog of interpretations. In local conflicts, are we able to distinguish religious impetuses from other kinds of motivation, such as political and economic ones?⁶ Religious justification was the way in which many Christian writers tended to explain the incidents that took place in late antique cities and the countryside. Triumphalist accounts of conflicts became a topos in church histories and hagiographies, but other factors, social and economic, were at work as well.

In the research of Late Antiquity, there have been two trends of perceiving the relations between religious groups. On the one hand, in the previous research there was a strong tendency to emphasise violent encounters, which is very much the consequence of late antique narratives of Christian triumph. Many late antique Christian writers, in church histories and hagiographies conceptualised

⁴ E.g. Drake 2006, 2-3; Magalhães de Oliveira 2012, 17-26; McLynn 1992, 15-44; Shaw 2011, 54 on the character of sources in North Africa.

⁵ E.g. Garnsey & Humfress 2001, 150 suggest that in the fourth century and especially from the early fifth century onwards, 'popular participation in religious competition and violence was on the increase' but how can we estimate that? Garnsey and Humfress regard mob attacks such as the killing of the Neoplatonic philosopher Hypatia in 415 as relatively rare. Alan Cameron 2011, 797-798 states that there certainly were confrontations between pagans and Christians, but probably fewer than have usually been surmised. Hahn 2004, 292 states, based on his analysis on fourth-century Alexandria, Antioch, Gaza and Panopolis, that religious violence was not a norm but rather an exception.

⁶ E.g. Hahn 2004, 292 argues that religious conflicts were mingled with other issues such as political, social and economic problems. While religious explanations have been the dominant interpretation of many conflicts, in the case of the North African conflicts, there was also a tendency to deduce the struggles between Donatists and Caecilianists (Catholics) to peasant rebellions and revolutionary social struggles; for the interpretations, see Shaw 2011, 1-4.

the Christianisation in terms of violent attacks and uncompromised victories over pagans.⁷ In Christian literary sources, the committed or rigorist writers made a lot of noise, and it is this noise that has greatly influenced the scholarly tendency to see Christianisation in conflictual terms.⁸

Here I understand the concept of conflict in wider terms than violent encounters between groups or individuals. Conflict is not the same as violence since it does not always include physical violence. Conflict implies that something is contested.⁹ We can speak about several other kinds of conflicts such as conflicts of interpretations in doctrinal disputes, conflicts of practices in everyday life, or conflicts of interests in local settings.

Late Antiquity has been depicted as the period witnessing the ‘coercive turn’ in the religious sphere.¹⁰ Similarly to conflict, coercion implies not only physical force and violence, but also the hegemony in the economic relations such as those between the land-owners and the tenants.¹¹ As Richard Gordon writes, Christian hostility in a ‘weak sense’ usually meant indirect pressure rather than active persecution.¹² Thus, coercion was not always based on using violence; instead, it could be grounded on socio-economic pressure. What late antique bishops called persuasion often was this kind of pressure. Peter Brown calls this pressure ‘gentle violence’, which was ‘brought to bear in more subtle, less melodramatic ways, more widely diffused throughout society’.¹³ It is this ‘gentle violence’ that I

⁷ For example, the fate of the pagan temples in Late Antiquity has also been disputed in recent scholarship. Late antique hagiographies, sermons, ecclesiastical histories and other Christian literary works abound with dramatic accounts of temples being destroyed or converted into churches. In many cases, Christian authors, esp. hagiographers, write in a considerably later period than the purported events. Consequently, these depictions are better understood as the ways in which writers looked back and wanted to explain the pagan past from their contemporary perspective. For example, this may be the case of the devastation of the temples in Gaza narrated in *Life of Porphyry* by Marcus Diaconus. See Rapp 2001, 53-75. A less drastic version, however, often emerges from non-literary material – archaeological evidence, papyri and inscriptions – that tell us a more nuanced story of the temples. See e.g. Dijkstra 2011, 389-436 for an excellent discussion on the problematics of the temple destructions in Egypt and the complexities of literary sources.

⁸ Sizgorich 2009, 8-11; Gaddis 2005, 6-14; Brown 1998, 634 for the defining narratives of Christianity. For the attraction of melodramas, see Lavan 2011, lv-lvi.

⁹ Mayer 2013, 2-4.

¹⁰ The term ‘coercive turn’, e.g. is used by Drake 2008, 450-451.

¹¹ E.g. Lenski 2009, 3-4 defines coercion as both physical force and the domination of relations of production and property-holding.

¹² Gordon 1999, 684-685. See also the discussion by Bjoernebye 2015, 210.

¹³ Brown 1995, xii; also Brown 2012, 45.

will focus on now – even though I have a few doubts about the gentleness.

Landowners and patronage

The patronage system (*patrocinium*) had a long history in Roman society, and the relationship between a patron and a client was one of the most significant types of dependence, dating from the Republic through the imperial period until Late Antiquity. Patron-client relations were often hereditary. Not only individual persons, but also the population of a certain region or city could be a client. Under the informal aegis of their patrons, clients could expect support in law cases, for instance, and protection in their trades. In return, a client's duty was to give his support to the patron in all possible ways. There were culturally specific rules built into the Roman legal system in regard to what was appropriate behaviour or correct types action in patronage relationships.¹⁴

In Late Antiquity, patronage relationships did not differ essentially from the early imperial period. These ties of dependence crossed through all levels of late Roman society: clients could be *humiliores* and *honestiores*, senators, *curiales*, peasants, rich and poor. Aristocrats continued to influence as donors and leaders of their communities and their role as patrons went on within families for generations. In late Roman society, aristocrats soon found themselves in competition with bishops for prestige and power.¹⁵ The emperor was the supreme patron. On the metaphorical level, saints emerged as patrons and on the top, there was the Christian deity.¹⁶ Patronage relationships were a generally recognised part of how Roman society functioned and how the Empire was governed. What was debated were the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate procedures. Also a matter of dispute was who the proper patrons were, especially in regions where new patrons – bishops and military commanders – appeared to compete with traditional ones, namely landowners.¹⁷

Bishops did not usually want to act against landowners. Instead, they stressed the respect for private property. It was, however, important to influence the local landowners who eventually decided whether the laws forbidding pagan practices were applied or not and whether pagan shrines were

¹⁴ For the Roman patronage system, see Garnsey & Woolf 1989, 153-167; Wallace-Hadrill 1989, 63-87; Saller 1982, Saller 2000, 817-854.

¹⁵ For Roman aristocrats as patrons, esp. in Rome and Italy, see Salzman 2007, 212-223.

¹⁶ E.g. Paulinus of Nola (carmen 20) regarded St. Felix as his patron.

¹⁷ E.g. Salvian (gub. 5.8) criticised disproportionate demands of landlords in Gaul. Libanius (or. 47; or. 52) complained about military commanders, a new sort of patrons, who came to protect peasants against the demands of landowners and challenged the old sort of patrons. Garnsey & Woolf 1989, 153-167; Liebeschuetz 1972, 192-208.

destroyed or allowed to remain open on their estates. Even the powerful bishops like Ambrose of Milan had to strike a balance between different parties and forces – the imperial administration, local administration, landowners, competing ecclesiastical leaders, competing Christian groups, ascetic movements, and peasants, Christians and pagans alike.

Powerful patrons could also play a decisive role in local disturbances. Both bishops and local leaders such as influential *curiales* and landowners could mobilise their clients. This was no novelty in Roman society in which influential patrons had for centuries gathered their clients and the clients of their clients into pressure groups.¹⁸ A bishop with dependants was just one variation of the client system.¹⁹

The authority of a head of a household, *paterfamilias*, was based on the old Roman *patria potestas* over the *familia*, which consisted of what we today call the nuclear family (spouse and children) and the extended family of slaves, servants and other dependants, even clients. This authority extended to religious practices since the head of the household was responsible for the sacred rites. Despite widening possibilities of individual religious choices from the imperial period onwards, the authority of heads of household and patrons remained decisive. The *paterfamilias* was responsible for maintaining religion in Christian households as well.²⁰

Early Christian accounts of conversions (as seen in Acts 16:13-15) stressed the conversions of whole households in which the slave-owner directed his slaves to be baptised.²¹ In the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, the heroine of the narrative Perpetua challenges the institution of the *paterfamilias* by making her own religious choice. Her father loses his face as his authority as *paterfamilias* is undermined.²² Even though the historicity of the gospel and hagiographic narratives is doubtful, they reveal social expectations.

¹⁸ For professional groups, see McLynn 1992, 36 and Lizzi 1995, 140.

¹⁹ Lizzi 1995, 116-118, 135 and Brown 1992, 85-95. The traditional Roman patronage and that of bishops of course had differences as is stressed by Lepelley 1998, 18-21, 32-33.

²⁰ North 1992, 185 on *patria potestas* in household religion. For the country estates as religious communities in and of themselves, see Bowes 2007, 161.

²¹ Glancy 2015, 462.

²² E.g. *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 5, where Perpetua's father begs her to have pity on him and change her mind; otherwise the father will be reproached by other Roman men for not being able to keep his family disciplined. For an analysis of the family dynamics and hierarchical reversal in the narrative, see Cooper 2012, 202.

Within these social parameters, it becomes more understandable that local landowners could play a decisive role in guiding rural populations to Christianity.²³ A landowner could give socio-economic support to some cults and withdraw his backing from other cults. This is why many bishops often addressed landowners in their sermons and letters. Christian *domini* were expected to guide their tenants by means of positive actions, such as by building churches on their estates. They could also pressure them by tearing down pagan shrines on their own property. Augustine of Hippo insisted that the master of a household should use all of his authority to either make his dependants Christians or encourage them remain as so. For example, in the *City of God*, he represents it as the ideal of landlords.²⁴ On the macro level of the state, it was the paternal duty of emperors to take care of the subjects' religion.²⁵

How successful and comprehensive this 'Christianisation' was, however, is another matter.²⁶ One can also ask to what extent patronage could affect the religious choices. Moreover, we can ask what religious choice was in Antiquity and to what extent we can speak of individual choices in late antique rural communities. This is not to underestimate or belittle the role of individual religiosity in Antiquity – only to be cautious with the modern presuppositions.²⁷

Bishops and landowners in Italy

When a landowner became Christian, he was expected to stop pagan practices on his property. This does not seem to have been an inevitable outcome, however, as we can read from the complaints of church leaders.

In a number of sermons, Maximus, the bishop of Turin (d. c. 420), advises the *divites* and *potentes* in his audience to wipe out the pagan impurities on their estates.²⁸ He uses the notion of pollution: idolatry pollutes the whole community, not only those who are directly participating in idolatry, but

²³ For the role of landowners in religious coercion, see Lizzi 1990, 168; Lizzi 2010, 103-104; Salzman 2007, 223; Riggs 2006, 302-305 and Garnsey & Humfress 2001, 91.

²⁴ Aug. civ. 19.16.

²⁵ Aug. ep. 185.19 states that it is the duty of rulers to issue laws against idols or destroy them.

²⁶ Furthermore, it is not always clear how Christianisation was (and is) understood: Leppin 2012, 247-278.

²⁷ For individualisation of religious choices, see Rüpke 2013, 3-38.

²⁸ Max. Taur. serm. 42.1; 106.2; 107.1; 108. For the complaints of pagan practices in Maximus' sermons, see Merkt 1997, 111, 139, 198.

also those who are aware of it and still keep quiet. As the performance of idolatry endangered everyone in the community – those performing the rites (*exercentes*), those living nearby (*habitantes*) and those watching (*intuentes*) – it was the duty of a landlord to make it stop. The landowner was believed to be polluted as well when his tenants made sacrifices (*Immolante enim rustico inquinatur domnedius*).²⁹

In another sermon, Maximus demands Christian landlords to put an end to peasants' sacrifices, appealing to the pollution again: as many are sanctified by the holiness of one, many are polluted by the sacrilege of one (*sicut unius sanctitate sanctificantur multi, ita unius sacrilegio plurimi polluuntur*). He is particularly annoyed at Christian landlords pretending not to know what their tenants were performing on their property: 'I do not know, I have not commanded [them to do so]; this is not my fault, this is none of my business' (*Nescio, non iussi; causa mea non est, non me tangit*).³⁰

Maximus also asserts that a landowner who *does not tolerate* the performance of sacrileges on his property does not have a defiled conscience. But for the landlord who knows that sacrifices are being made to idols on his estate and still does not prohibit that, the horrendous pollution (*pollutio ... nefanda*) touches him.³¹ Landlords were held to be responsible even if they lived far away from their estates in a city.³²

Other bishops to complain about the laxity of landlords were Zeno of Verona (fl. c. 360-380) and Gaudentius of Brescia (d. c. 410). Gaudentius, for example, paralleled the negligence with idolatrous practices with *adulteria*, *stupra* and other transgressions.³³ He recurrently warned his audience from

²⁹ Max. Taur. serm. 107.2. For the idea of pollution, see Kahlos 2013a, 159-171.

³⁰ Max. Taur. serm. 106.2.

³¹ Max. Taur. serm. 108: *Ceterum qui scit in agro suo idolis immolari nec prohibet, quamvis ipse longe in civitate consistat, pollutio tamen illum nefanda continget; et licet aris adsistat rusticus, ad domnedium contaminatio exsecranda regreditur*. For discussion, see Kahlos 2013a, 159-171; Lizzi 2010, 100; Dölger 1950, 307-309. Ambr. Nabutha 18 refers to landlords who often visited their estates to control the upkeep of their properties.

³² Similarly to the Italian landowners, Augustine expected the landlords in his North African audience not to live on their properties: see Dossey 2010, 148.

³³ Gaudent. tract. 13.28: *An existimatis quod deum diligit tepidus ac neglegens Christianus, qui idola in possessionibus suis coli permittit, qui fanum daemonis et aram diaboli stare in contumeliam dei patitur, qui adulteria ac stupra exercere non desinit, qui aliena cotidie rapit, cotidie concupiscit, necare proximum quibuscumque modis gestiens, quo vel voluptatem vel cupiditatem suam licentius impleat, licet explere non possit?*

becoming involved in traditional rituals and being thus polluted by idolatry and especially by the mortifying food of demons – referring to the food dedicated to the gods in traditional rituals.³⁴ Zeno complains that landlords pretended not to know about the fuming shrines on their estates. He mocks their fake ignorance since they knew exactly every clod of earth, stone and twig on their neighbours' estates. Zeno implies that from pretending ignorance there was not a long way to accepting idolatrous practices: *Probatio longe non est*.³⁵

When complaining about the laxity of landlords, Maximus of Turin describes them with the words *coniventia*, *dissimulare* and *dissimulatio*.³⁶ The same terms are used in imperial decrees when the legislator speaks about the negligence in enforcing law or the disregard of judges.³⁷ The words appear also in laws forbidding pagan practices and condemning heresies. For example, in *CTh*16.10.12.4 (in 392) forbidding several pagan practices, it is declared that the law should be enforced by the judges and *defensores* as well as *decuriones* of the cities. It is stressed that the crimes reported should be punished by the judges. Then the legislator feels it necessary to warn that if some should think that these crimes should be concealed through favouritism (*gratia*) or overlooked through carelessness (*incuria*), they will be subject to judicial indignation. Furthermore, the judges are warned: 'If the judges should be advised of such crimes and should defer punishment through connivance

³⁴ Polluted by idolatry in general: Gaudent. tract. 9. 2: *Unde cavendum nobis est, omni genere dilectissimi, ne aliquo rursus idolatriae violemur contagio et non solum repudiari, sed et damnari in perpetuum mereamur* with reference to 1 Cor. 3:17. Polluted by the food dedicated to the gods: Gaudent. tract. 4. 13: '*Vos igitur, neophyti, qui estis ad beatae huius ac spiritalis paschae epulas invitati, videte, quomodo ab omni pollutione escarum, quas superstio gentilis infecerit, vestras animas conservetis. Nec sufficit, ut a mortifero daemonum cibo vitam suam custodiat Christianus, ...*' S. Gaudentii episcopi Brixienensis tractatus, CSEL 68, ed. A. Glück 1936. See Lizzi 2009, 403 on Gaudentius' complaints.

³⁵ Zeno Veron. serm. 1.25.10: *Hic quaerite, Christiani, sacrificium vestrum an esse possit acceptum, qui vicinarum possessionum omnes glebulas, lapillos et sarculos nostis, in praediis autem vestris fumantia undique sola fana non nostis, quae, si vera dicenda sunt, dissimulando subtiliter custoditis. Probatio longe non est.* CC (SL) 22, ed. Löfstedt, 1971. Dölger 1950, 305 takes 'every clod of earth, stone and twig' to mean the remains of traditional rural sacrifices.

³⁶ Max. Taur. serm. 106.1: *Nam cum perspicerent in regione sua gentiles homines adsueto sacrilegio quod lustrum vocant funestis circuitionibus loca universa pollueret, et innocentes quosque vel absentes si non conscientia vel coniventia maculare – maculat enim coniventia eum qui, cum contradicendo prohibere potuit ne fieret, ut fieret quasi dissimulando permisit*; serm. 106.2: *reos nos statuimus si non operatione sceleris at tamen dissimulationis adsensu.*

³⁷ The Latin word *dissimulatio* has a variety of meanings (e.g. making someone or oneself to look different, covering, disguising, masking, pretence, trickery). It can be translated as dissimulation, dishonesty, duplicity and connivance. The Latin word *conniventia/coniventia* has the meanings of closing the eyes; thus, turning a blind eye to something, carelessness, negligence and prevarication.

(*dissimulatio*), they shall be fined thirty pounds of gold'.³⁸ *Dissimulatio*, *gratia* and *incuria* – connivance, favouritism and negligence – were an integral part of the administration and civic life in the late Roman Empire. This was mostly due to the low salaries of minor officials in the administration; there was a tendency to acquire additional income from all sorts of extra payments and bribes, and officials were more or less expected to rely on these.³⁹

Many of the extant laws prohibiting pagan activities also threatened penalties against authorities who fail to put the law into practice. In 408, in a law against pagans and heretics that ordered their buildings and temples to be released for public use, the emperors proclaimed that they were compelled 'by the pertinacity of the Donatists and the madness of pagans which have been enkindled by the evil sloth of the judges (*mala desidia iudicum*), by the connivance of the office staffs (*coniventia officiorum*), and by the contempt of municipal senates (*ordinum contemptus*)' to repeat the previously given regulations.⁴⁰ Another example is a law in 409 targeting heretics, Jews and pagans, which reminded that the laws previously issued against those groups had not diminished in force. This message was particularly meant for judges, who 'shall know that the precepts thereof must be obeyed with loyal devotion'. They are then threatened with punishments, 'if any of the judges through the crime of connivance (*peccato coniventiae*) should fail to execute the present law'.⁴¹

³⁸ CTh 16.10.12.4 (in 392): *Quod quidem ita per iudices ac defensores et curiales singularum urbium volumus custodiri, ut ilico per hos comperta in iudicium deferantur, per illos delata plectantur. Si quid autem ii tegendum gratia aut incuria praetermittendum esse crediderint, commotioni iudiciariae, subiacebunt; illi vero moniti si vindictam dissimulatione distulerint, triginta librarum auri dispendio multabuntur, officiis quoque eorum damno parili subiugandis.*

³⁹ For late antique administration and extra payments, see Kelly 2004, 107-185. Jill Harries 1999, 5 states that 'one should not believe everything emperors or their elite imitators, said or write was true', for example, on the corrupt behaviour of judges. Furthermore, complaints should not be interpreted as self-evident evidence of widespread misconduct of magistrates, especially judges. Harries speaks of 'a culture of criticism' in which historians, rhetoricians, and bishops also condemned abuses of power with similarly assertive and critical attitude. This does not mean that 'there was, necessarily, more to criticise in the fourth and fifth centuries than there had been earlier'.

⁴⁰ Sirm. 12 (in 408): *Compulsi igitur Donatistarum pertinacia, furore gentilium, quae quidem mala desidia iudicum, coniventia officiorum, ordinum contemptus accendit, necessarium putamus iterare quae iussimus.* Trans. Pharr.

⁴¹ CTh 16.5.46 (Jan. 15, 409): *Ne Donatistae vel ceterorum vanitas haereticorum aliorumque eorum, quibus catholicae communionis cultus non potest persuaderi, iudaei adque gentiles, quos vulgo paganos appellant, arbitrentur legum ante adversum se datarum constituta tepuisse, noverint iudices universi praeceptis earum fideli devotione parendum et inter praecipua curarum quidquid adversus eos decrevimus non ambigant exsequendum. Quod si quisquam iudicum peccato coniventiae executionem praesentis legis omiserit, noverit amissa dignitate graviolem motum se nostrae clementiae subiturum, officium quoque suum, quod saluti propriae contempta suggestionem defuerit, punitis tribus primatibus condemnatione viginti librarum auri plectendum.* See also CTh 16.5.4 in 378: *Quod sive dissimulatione iudicum seu*

Both bishops and imperial legislators saw Christianising peasants as the responsibility of landlords. Thus, an attempt to correct landowners was made in the imperial legislation: it was decreed that landlords were to destroy pagan shrines. In the same law, together with the pressure on landowners, bishops were given the authority to prohibit traditional ritual banquets (*episcopis quoque locorum haec ipsa prohibendi ecclesiasticae manus tribuimus facultatem*).⁴² The imperial legislators noticed the landlords' awareness of 'pagan superstition' and laxity in abolishing it. A law of 392 ruled different punishments depending on whether sacrifices were performed without the knowledge of the landowner (*ignorante domino*) or with a person's connivance (*coniventem*).⁴³ Another law of 472 decreed the confiscation of those estates or houses in which the landlords knew (*scientibus dominis*) that 'pagan superstition' was practiced and permitted it.⁴⁴

Bishops and landowners in North Africa

In North Africa as well, powerful landowners whether they were Christian or pagan could exercise significant influence on their dependants (again, whether Christian or pagan, 'Donatist' or 'Catholic').⁴⁵ According to Augustine, there was a saying in Hippo about a certain aristocrat: if he were a Christian, no one would remain pagan (*ille nobilis, si Christianus esset, nemo remaneret paganus*). Augustine's remark shows the expectations that ecclesiastical leaders put on aristocratic landowners and the leaders of the community.⁴⁶ While the propaganda value of aristocratic conversions was also

profanorum improbitate contigerit, eadem erit ex utroque pernicies. Other examples *CTh* 16.10.4; 16.10.13; 16.10.19. For further discussion, see Kahlos, forthcoming.

⁴² *CTh* 16.10.19.2 (in 408) = *Sirm.* 12 (in 408): *Arae locis omnibus destruantur omniaque templa in possessionibus nostris ad usus adcommodos transferantur, domini destruere cogantur.*

⁴³ *CTh* 16.10.12.3 (in 392): *Sin vero in templis fanisve publicis aut in aedibus agrisque alienis tale quispiam sacrificandi genus exercere temptaverit, si ignorante domino usurpata constiterit, viginti quinque libras auri multae nomine cogetur inferre, coniventem vero huic sceleri par ac sacrificantem poena retinebit.*

⁴⁴ *Clust* 1.11.8 (in 472): *pertemptare quae saepius paganae superstitionis hominibus interdicta sunt.*

⁴⁵ I abide here to use the conventional terms. The North African Christian group called Donatists by their rivals and subsequent generations of scholars considered itself the catholic church. It regarded its opponents merely as *traditores* or *Caeciliani*, basing the name on the rival bishop of Carthage, Caecilianus.

⁴⁶ Aug. in psalm. 54.13: *Plerumque dicunt homines: Nemo remaneret paganus, si ille esset christianus. Plerumque dicunt homines: Et ille si fieret christianus, quis remaneret paganus.* See also Lizzi 2010, 95.

certainly great,⁴⁷ the most significant weight was connected to the socio-economic influence of the leading landowners.

As Augustine complains, local men in power positions, in towns and country, were so powerful that Christians were afraid of offending those in more powerful positions and consequently were persuaded to engage in pagan practices. All sorts of social contacts – superior, inferior or equal in the hierarchy – drew a Christian to pagan practices.⁴⁸ Augustine also mentions that the needs of everyday life – in Augustine's words, *temporalis commoditas* – led people either to embrace Christianity or to retain pagan practices. The pressure of this world, *pressura huius saeculi*, that is, the ties of dependence, had an effect on their choices.⁴⁹

In his preaching, Augustine was attentive in demanding respect for private property and calming his listeners if there was a risk that they would become too zealous and go to attack pagan shrines without proper authorisation.⁵⁰ He admitted that there were still pagan cult places on the estates of many pagan landowners (*Multi pagani habent istas abominationes in fundis suis*).⁵¹ He stressed that Christian

⁴⁷ This was the case of the renowned philosopher and rhetorician Marius Victorinus in Rome, which the ecclesiastical leaders in Rome were ready to utilise for the fame of the Roman church (Aug. conf. 8.2.3). On the propaganda value, see Ando 1996, 203.

⁴⁸ Aug. serm. 62.5.8: *Sed timeo, inquires, ne offendam maiorem. Time prorsus, ne offendas maiorem; et non offendis Deum. Qui enim times, ne offendas maiorem, vide ne forte sit maior isto, quem times offendere. Maiorem certe noli offendere. Haec tibi regula proponitur. Nonne manifestum est, eum minime offendendum, qui maior est caeteris? Discute nunc maiores tuos. Primi tibi sunt pater et mater: si recte educantes, si in Christum nutrientes; audiendi in omnibus, obtemperandum eis in omni iussione; contra maiorem nihil iubeant, et serviatur illis; serm. 81.7: Ad hoc enim tibi dicitur, ut tu, si amas mundum, blasphemus Christum. Et dicit tibi hoc amicus tuus, consiliarius tuus: ergo oculus tuus. Dicit tibi hoc minister tuus, cooperarius tuus: ergo manus tua. Dicit tibi hoc forte qui te sustentat, qui te ab humilitate terrena subleuat: ergo pes tuus. ... Ecce temporibus christianis tantae pressurae sunt, vastatur mundus; conf. 8.4.9.*

⁴⁹ Aug. serm. 47.18: *Nulla temporali proposita commoditate vult esse christianus, non ut maiorem amicum conciliet, non ut ad concupitam uxorem perveniat, non ut aliquam pressuram huius saeculi evadat, quamquam multi etiam sic intrantes corriguntur ingressi.* Warning about earthly concerns: Aug. serm. Dolbeau 24.8 (= 360A); see Dolbeau 1991, 41; conveniences of the present life: Aug. catech. rud. 16.24: *vitae praesentis aliquod commodum*. Aug. serm. 279: some aimed to attain administrative posts.

⁵⁰ On Augustine's respect for the private property and the imperial legislation, see Kahlos 2013b, 66-69; Dossey 2010, 179-180 and Riggs 2006, 302.

⁵¹ Aug. serm. 62.11.17: *Cum acceperitis potestatem, hoc facite. Ubi nobis non est data potestas, non facimus: ubi data est, non praetermittimus. Multi pagani habent istas abominationes in fundis suis: numquid acsedimus et confrigimus?*

enthusiasts should wait patiently until landowners became Christians and then destroy the pagan shrines on their estates themselves (*Quando christianus erit cuius res est. Modo factum voluit cuius res est*).⁵²

Similar tensions applied in the enmity between the ‘Donatists’ and ‘Catholics’ in North Africa, where local landowners exerted pressure on their tenants. The Council of Carthage of 411 ordered local leaders – decurions, landowners, and village leaders – to close Donatist churches and hand their property over to the Catholics.⁵³ A law of 412 decreed that landlords were to flog their Donatist *coloni* and *servi*, and magistrates were to collect fines. If landlords failed to draw their slaves and tenants of Donatism, they were ordered to pay penalties.⁵⁴

Augustine commended the Christian aristocrat Pammachius who had succeeded in persuading his African tenants to abandon their ‘furious folly of Donatists’. Pammachius had ‘admonished them in such a way and encouraged them with such a fervour of spirit that they with forthright devotion chose to follow’ his Catholic course (*tali admoneres alloquio, tanto fervore spiritus animares, ut devotione promptissima ad sequendum eligerent*).⁵⁵ Augustine does not mention any details here, and one can only surmise which Pammachius’ methods were in persuading his *coloni* to give up their Donatist inclination and embrace the Catholic one. In any case, (according to Augustine) the landlord’s role was decisive.

In Pammachius’ case, Augustine praised the pressure brought by Catholic landowners on Donatist tenants. However, this would not do the other way around as his complaints about the similar

Prius enim agimus, ut idola in eorum corde frangamus. Quando Christiani et ipsi facti fuerint, aut invitant nos ad tam bonum opus, aut praeveniunt nos. Modo orandum est pro illis, non irascendum illis.

⁵² Aug. serm. 62.12.18.

⁵³ *Edictum cognitoris*: Actes de la conférence de Carthage en 411. Vol. 3, ed. Serge Lancel. SC 224. Paris: Du Cerf, 1975, 974-976, ll. 41-56.

⁵⁴ *CTh* 16.5.52; esp. 16.5.52.4: *Servos etiam dominorum admonitio vel colonos verberum crebrior ictus a prava religione revocabit, ni malunt ipsi ad praedicta dispendia, etiam si sunt catholici, retineri.*

⁵⁵ Aug. ep. 58.1 (in 401): *Verumtamen iam simul, eramus, et coniuncti sub uno capite vivebamus, in cuius caritate nisi radicatus esses, non tibi tam dilecta catholica unitas foret, nec colonos tuos Afros, eo terrarum unde Donatistarum furor exortus est, hoc est in media consulari Numidia constitutos, tali admoneres alloquio, tanto fervore spiritus animares, ut devotione promptissima ad sequendum eligerent, quod te talem ac tantum virum non nisi agnita veritate sequi cogitarent, et tam longe a te locorum intervallis remoti, irent sub idem caput, atque in eius membris in aeternum tecum deputerentur, cuius praecepto tibi temporaliter serviunt.* See also Shaw 2011, 205-206.

pressuring by Donatists show. In the early fifth century, the Catholic side had the imperial backing with legislation against Donatists and thus Augustine could appeal to edicts and threaten landowners if these promoted the wrong sect. In his debate with Petilianus, Augustine condemns the procedures of Crispinus, the Donatist bishop of Calama and a landlord – or technically Crispinus had purchased an emphyteutic lease of an imperial estate.⁵⁶ Crispinus had immediately re-baptised eighty souls to Donatist inclination. This happened ‘under the sole influence of terror’ (*uno terroris impetu*) and the people compelled to rebaptism groaned with miserable voices (*miserabili gemitu mussitantes*).⁵⁷ Augustine’s rhetoric is of course composed to achieve indignation among the audience, and the reactions of tenants coerced to Donatist baptism on Crispinus’ newly purchased estate escape us.⁵⁸ The contrast between Augustine’s two depictions is ostensible even though the situations with landowners is about the same. As said, the difference was that a Donatist landowner could not coerce his tenants to his religion – against imperial law.⁵⁹

Augustine urged several times landlords to guide their tenants to ‘the communion of the Catholic church’; one example is his letter to a landowner called Donatus. This landlord was to exhort all his dependents (*tuosque omnes*) kindly and benevolently (*comiter et benigne*).⁶⁰ In another letter to an aristocrat called Festus, Augustine raises the problem of Donatists: ‘Your men (*homines vestros*) in the region of Hippo are still Donatists, and your letter has not made any influence on them’. So, Augustine admonishes Festus to do something to the problem and send a trusted man to consult the matter with Augustine who will find a solution.⁶¹ Donatists should be handled with what Augustine

⁵⁶ Dossey 2010, 179; Hermanowicz 2008, 105. Land holding by emphyteusis was the use of an imperial estate – its possession, enjoyment, mortgage and bequest to heirs.

⁵⁷ Aug. c. litt. Petil. 2.83.184: *Quid nuper, quod ipse adhuc lugeo, nonne Crispinus vester Calamensis, cum emisset possessionem, et hoc emphyteuticam, non dubitavit in fundo catholicorum imperatorum, quorum legibus nec in civitatibus esse iussi estis, uno terroris impetu octoginta ferme animas miserabili gemitu mussitantes rebaptizando submergere?*

⁵⁸ As Leslie Dossey 2010, 147-150 shows, Augustine’s audience mainly consisted of the property-owning literate elite.

⁵⁹ Crispinus had stated that the peasants were not forced to Donatism but rather had embraced it voluntarily. This is implied in Augustine’s ep. 66.2 in which Augustine provokes Crispinus to a public debate. See Riggs 2006, 306; Hermanowicz 2008, 105-106; Dossey 2010, 180. On Crispinus as the significant rival of Catholic bishops, especially Augustine and his ally Possidius of Calama, see Hermanowicz 2008, 69 and Ebbeler 2012, 171-172.

⁶⁰ Aug. ep. 112.3 (in 409/410): *Per quem te obsecro ut rescribas mihi, tuosque omnes quos in Sinitensi vel Hipponensi habes, ad catholicae Ecclesiae communionem comiter et benigne adhorteris.*

⁶¹ Aug. ep. 89.8 (between 405-411): *Quae cum ita sint, noverit Benignitas tua homines vestros qui in regione Hipponensi sunt, adhuc esse donatistas, nec apud eos quidquam valuisse tuas litteras. Cur autem non valuerint, non opus est scribere; sed mitte aliquem tuorum, vel domesticorum, vel amicorum, cuius hoc fidei possis iniungere, qui non ad ea loca, sed ad*

calls ‘the gentlest discipline’ (*misericordissima disciplina*).⁶²

The methods of the ‘gentle discipline’ varied. In his notorious letter 93, Augustine stressed the responsibility of *pater familias*, the head of the household, in correcting Donatists and bringing them ‘back’ to the Catholic church.⁶³ Furthermore, Augustine was concerned about the Donatists inciting slaves and peasants against their landlords. He portrays Donatists as militants and troublemakers, and as challenging the established hierarchical order of Roman society: ‘One flees unity so that the peasantry may rise boldly against their lords, and the slaves also, contrary to apostolic precept. The fugitive slaves are not only alienated from their masters, but threaten their masters, and are not content with threats, but pass to the most violent attacks and robberies at their expense.’⁶⁴

An anonymous North African writer congratulates his addressee, a landowner or a bishop called Salvius, for having converted stubborn souls to Christianity ‘without any threats or terror at all’ (*nullis minis, nullis omnino terroribus*).⁶⁵ His tone reveals admiring amazement as if the non-violent and non-terrorising procedures with success were exceptional in his world of experience. It is difficult say whether the tenants were converted from traditional pagan cults to Christianity or from Donatism

nos primitus veniat illis omnino nescientibus, et nobiscum primitus consilio pertractato, quod agendum Domino adiuvante visum fuerit, agat.

⁶² Aug. ep. 89.2. Augustine writes that Donatists thought themselves as suffering from persecution and themselves acted with *violenta insania*.

⁶³ Aug. ep. 93. For a discussion of Augustine’s argumentation in this letter, see Kahlos 2009, 112; see also Forst 2013, 52-55.

⁶⁴ Esp. Aug. ep. 108.6.18. Translation from Frend 1952, 73-74. Troublemakers: Aug. ep. 185.4.15. Glancy 2015, 478 cautiously gives Donatist circumcelliones as one example of late antique people who *may* have challenged the institution of slavery. This is hardly the case; Donatists probably only challenged the Catholic order, not the institution of slavery as such. For a new more balanced reinterpretation of the circumcelliones movement, see Dossey 2010, 167-168 who sees it ‘as justified, meaningful, structured action’, as an effort of rural populations ‘to participate in the same material culture, community structures, and intellectual currents as were affecting urban society’. The religious leaders of circumcelliones probably did not attack the systems of slavery or debt payment but rather the traditional but illegal conventions in the North African countryside (Dossey 2010, 173).

⁶⁵ Anonym. ep. ad Salvium (=Ps.-Sulpicius ep. 4): *Hoc ipsum nos in tuis praeceptionibus admiramur, quod nullis minis, nullis omnino terroribus, ad cultum Dei vaesanos animos convertisti*. The letter is published in Lepelley 1989, 252, who dates it after 411. The letter is found in a manuscript of the works of Sulpicius Severus. The letter’s reference to the tale of Xenocrates and Polemo reminds of the similar one in Augustine’s ep. 144; it is, however, impossible to say whether this is due to dependence between the letters or just a commonplace. Lepelley 1989, 252-256; Salzman 2006, 278; Shaw 2011, 344-345; Dossey 2010, 155.

to mainstream Christianity. Furthermore, it not certain if the addressee Salvius carried his missionary operations with the authority from imperial legislation.⁶⁶

The complaints and appeals discussed above reflect a conflict of interests between local landowners and bishops on the regional level. It is possible that a number of landlords saw the traditional religious practices as convenient and advantageous for the maintenance of tranquillity, order and economic dependencies on their properties. Private religiosity and episcopal authority were often in tension and rivalry with one another in the countryside – not only between pagan landowners and Christian bishops, but even between Christian landlords and bishops. Local landowning elites were accustomed to keep (or at least try to keep) the religious activities of their dependents in their control.⁶⁷ Sometimes landowners and bishops had shared interests, or at least that is what bishops such as Maximus of Turin and Augustine at pains to ascertain.⁶⁸

The pressures that were set on the paternal role of landowners did not mean that everything proceeded along the expectations either of landlords themselves, or bishops who wanted to influence the landlords, or imperial legislators who threatened with confiscation of property. Rural populations certainly found ways to evade menace and adapt to changed circumstances. Tenants were not passive vessels even though elite writers may have supposed so. A conflict between tenants and their bad-behaving bishop Antoninus in Fussala discussed by Augustine reveals us how tenants had their way

⁶⁶ The letter does not mention either Donatists or pagans directly. Lepelley 1989, 254-256, suggests that the peasant converted were Donatists and after the decisions made for annihilating Donatism in the Council of Carthage in 411. Shaw 2011, 345 remarks that other alternatives are also possible. Dossey 2010, 155 states that the phrase *cum paucis iniusta sentire*, ‘believing unjust things with a few’ makes more sense in the context of the schism.

⁶⁷ Bowes 2007, 163-166 argues that Roman estate shrines helped to keep peasants’ religious attentions close to home and thus within the landlord’s sphere of influence. In the fourth and fifth centuries, however, landowners and ecclesiastical leaders competed for prestige and authority, and private religiosity turned to be problematic to church leaders as the cases of Priscillianism and Pelagianism show: Bowes 2007, 163-166; Allen & Neil 2013, 115-119; Kurdoch 2007, 190-224; Brown 2012, 51. The imperial legislators also became increasingly concerned about private religiosity and private meeting places: Shepardson 2014, 204-213.

⁶⁸ Similarly, in the East, John Chrysostom (hom. in act. apost. 18.4-5; PG 60, col. 146-148) was keen to show his elite listeners that it was beneficial for landlords to make their tenants Christian and control their religiosity because it calmed them down. John Chrysostom summons landlords to build a church, get a teacher and cooperate in converting the tenants. There should no estates without a church. He argues that having churches and priests and Christianising the tenants is profitable ‘for the tranquillity of the working people’. The workers will respect the priest and this will improve the security of the estate.

of negotiating and influencing their own surroundings. The Fussalans who were displeased with their bishop complained to Augustine and demanded Antoninus to be removed.⁶⁹ As Leslie Dossey has shown, North African peasants were seeking actively to influence their own communities, for example, in petitioning for their own priests. Many of the conflicts in late antique Africa resulted from these ambitions of the peasantry, the fragmentation of the curial and senatorial elites and the competition between Catholic and Donatist elites. Peasants could play their part in the rivalry between the elites.⁷⁰

Gentlest discipline and economic pressure

What kind of conversion did this combination of persuasion and pressure produce on rural areas? Were conversions of tenants sincere? Another important question is what kind of conversions modern researchers regard as sincere and what early Christian leaders considered sincere. Late antique bishops were aware of the problems connected with force and pressure. Several writers lamented about feigned conversions, including Eusebius of Caesarea who otherwise celebrates the triumph of Christianity in the wake of Constantine's shift to Christianity.⁷¹ Many of complaints tell us more about the expectations of the ecclesiastical elite than any social facts of the converts' mind-set. The same bishops, specifically Augustine (as we saw above), who advocated the 'gentlest discipline' also grieved about feigned conversions. Augustine acknowledged the reality in which many pagans became Christians only for show so that their cult places would be left in peace and they could just continue with their traditional practices. Even when exulting the growing church with the metaphor the huge haul of fishes, Augustine is worried about the mixture of the good and the bad; furthermore, the full boat is at risk of sinking. Maximus of Turin complained that some people confessed Christ only with their lips and went to the church only to be considered Christians.⁷²

In regard to Donatist Christians, Augustine justified the coercion by eventual good consequences. One might think that 'no one should be compelled to justice' but one could read the parable from the Scriptures that the head of the household said to his servants: 'Compel them come in whomsoever

⁶⁹ Aug. ep. 20*. For the conflict, see Lancel 1983, 267-285 and Bowes 2008, 167-168.

⁷⁰ Dossey 2010, 152.

⁷¹ Eus. v. Const. 4.54.2 complains that many people became Christians only to please the emperor. Similarly complains the church historian Sozomen (eccl. 2.5).

⁷² Aug. serm. 248-252; Max. Taur. serm. 41.4; 79; 71.2. Cf. Libanius (or. 30.26-29) who as part of defence of pagan temples argued that coercion only made peasants pretend that they had become Christians and continue to invoke their own gods but now in Christian churches. With similar statements: Procop. hist. arc. 11.31-32.

you will find' [Lk. 14:16-24].⁷³ Here we have again *pater familias*, head of the household, who is expected to invite his dependents to the table of Christianity. Furthermore, Augustine offers the conversion of the Apostle Paul as an *exemplum* for forced conversion that turned out to be beneficial, not only to himself, but also to the Christian mission.⁷⁴

In the fourth and fifth centuries, bishops were at pains persuading landowners to wipe out pagan shrines on their estates and control the religiosity of their tenants. In the sixth century, the position of the Christian churches was stronger. In many regions, bishops had a powerful role as patrons themselves both in city and country. In Gaul, for instance, Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) actively built an authoritative role as an administrator, benefactor and sponsor. Nevertheless, he also had to complain about the traditional rituals practiced in the countryside and appeal to the landlords. Caesarius laments that the landlords not only are unwilling to abolish *paganorum fana*, but they even rebuild cult places that have already been destroyed.⁷⁵

Gregory, Bishop of Rome, also complained about the continuing pagan practices in Italy. As Robert Markus has remarked, the people whom Gregory calls 'pagans' (*gentiles*) 'have either already entered the *ecclesia* or have still to do so'. 'Pagan' was a versatile term that could be used in different contexts, referring to the 'gentile' within the Church itself, or marking people as outsiders, not within the community of the faithful.⁷⁶ Gregory writes about baptised Christians who went to church but also continued to visit the traditional cult places, taking part in 'the cult of demons'.⁷⁷ What these people thought themselves to be escapes us.

In a letter to the local aristocrats and landowners (*nobiles ac possessores*) in Sardinia, Gregory

⁷³ Aug. ep. 93 to Vincentius, esp. 9.3.2.5: *Putas neminem debere cogi ad iustitiam, cum legas patrem familias dixisse servis: Quoscumque inveneretis cogite intrare*. Augustine also writes about his own change of attitude on religious coercion.

⁷⁴ Aug. ep. 93.2.5. See also Kahlos 2009, 115 and Dumézil 2005, 14.

⁷⁵ Esp. Caes. Arel. serm. 14.4 and serm. 53.2: *sunt enim, quod peius est, infelices et miseri, qui paganorum fana non solum destruere nolunt, sed etiam quae destructa fuerant aedificare nec metuunt nec erubescunt*. See also serm. 54.5-6; 19.4 (SC 175). Klingshirn 1985, 183-203 on Caesarius' patronage. Lizzi 2010, 101-102, 108 on the complaints of traditional rituals.

⁷⁶ E.g., Greg. M. mor. 29.26.53: within the Church itself; Greg. M. mor. 29.6.12-7.16: marking people as outsiders. Markus 2001, 23-26. On Gregory of Rome and paganism, see Demacopoulos 2015, 91-93.

⁷⁷ E.g., Greg. M. ep. 8.1; 8.4. As Markus 2001, 30 points out, in principle, Gregory was against forced baptism but in practical cases supported coercion.

complains that they let their peasants practice idolatry on their properties: they should feel guilty for the religious crimes that their dependents commit. They merely see what is happening and keep quiet.⁷⁸ Furthermore, Gregory insists that Sardinian tenants should be persuaded with such a severe increase in their rents that it would force them to Christianity.⁷⁹ He also disapproves of magistrates who make considerable profit by collecting fines from those who made sacrifices to idols.⁸⁰ Thus, he implies that magistrates were not even interested in making an end to forbidden rituals since they actually were a source of income to them.

Conclusion

The central aim of my article was to challenge the conflictual narratives of history by drawing attention away from the melodramatic events, destructions of temples and religious riots and by reminding about the everyday life issues such as conflicts of interests, economic ties of dependence and rivalry in authority. My discussion focused on the rural patronage of landowners who were regarded as responsible for their tenants' religious actions and beliefs. This idea of the landlord's power and duty on his dependents had a long history in Roman society in which the *pater familias*, the head of the household, controlled (or was expected to control) the sphere of religion in the *familia*. Thus, much of the religious change in Late Antiquity, the process that is usually called the Christianisation of the Mediterranean world, was conducted in the lines of the Roman social system with its hierarchy, patronage and ties of dependence. Is it possible that hierarchical paternalistic system made the religious coercion particularly conceivable and workable in late Roman society?

We should, however, try to avoid reading too much into the social circumstances. The expectations of the paternal role did not mean that all happened along the wishes of the landowners, or bishops who wanted to influence the landlords. Rural populations certainly found ways to circumvent and avoid things if they chose so. Each case is unique in its local circumstances, with local solutions. We have cases with conflicts of interest, not only between pagan landowners and bishops in the regular routines of everyday life, but also between Christian landlords and local bishops who compete for

⁷⁸ Greg. M. ep. 4.23: ... *cognovi, pene omnes vos rusticos in vestris possessionibus idololatriae deditos habere. ... Et tamen vos veri Dei cultores a commissis vobis lapides adorari conspiciatis et tacetis?* Markus 2001, 30; Lizzi 2010, 110.

⁷⁹ Greg. M. ep. 4.26: *Iam vero si rusticus tantae fuerit perfidiae et obstinationis inventus, ut ad Deum venire minime consentiat, tanto pensionis onere gravandus est, ut ipsa exactionis suae poena compellatur ad rectitudinem festinare.* MacMullen 1984, 144 n. 18; Lizzi 2010, 109-110.

⁸⁰ Greg. ep. 5.38: *Sed rem mihi sacrilegam nuntiavit, quia hi qui in ea idolis immolant iudici praemium persolvunt, ut hoc eis facere liceat.*

authority in doctrinal disputes and private religiosity.

Late antique bishops' complaints tell us about the continuing 'paganism' in the countryside, at least in the form that these bishops imagined and understood. The only thing we know for sure are the bishops' views. What escapes us are the practices and beliefs of the country folk and the ways in which these people themselves saw their everyday life nuisances.